

A Visit to the Village Elder: From Deep Deuce to Harlem and Back Again

Phyllis E. Bernard

Ralph Ellison's *Juneteenth* is dedicated "To That Vanished Tribe into Which I Was Born: The American Negroes."¹ I am a member of that "tribe." Our "village" was Deep Deuce, the Negro quadrant of Northeast Oklahoma City from Territory days through the early 1960s. Our "village elders" included many men and women of Du Bois' Talented Tenth, dedicated to mutual support and advancement of the race. Mr. Ellison was not only our village elder and *griot* but also America's.

Like the tradition in Africa, Ralph Ellison's weaving of story, history, and music tapped into the consciousness of a society undergoing continual growth pains. His work reminded America and American Negroes of who we were, who we are, and what we yet can become. Like any true son of the soil, he carried the village—Deep Deuce—with him, without being bowed by the burden, for he turned Oklahoma red clay into art for others to celebrate, and from which they could learn and grow strong.

For decades, some critics have pondered the question: if Ellison loved Oklahoma so much, why did he not return more often? I, in turn, pondered why one would ask. What was so difficult to understand? In many ways, he never left the Territory, only added to its reach. Note, I said the "Territory"—as a shorthand for the metaphysical place, a subjective experience embedded in, but transcending, objective data.

When Ralph Ellison needed a more direct and deep connection, he did not need to travel to the black West; the West came East, embodied in his dearest friend since childhood, Mr. Jimmy Stewart. I was honored to be Jimmy Stewart's niece in the extended family system. When I arrived in New York City in the 1970s, it was time for Uncle Jimmy to make the customary introductions: for me to pay my respects to the Ellisons, and for them to give me their (informal) blessing.

We shared a love of Harlem and of Deep Deuce. I was born in Harlem; lived in Deep Deuce. Ellison was born in Deep Deuce; lived in Harlem. Both of us saw these worlds in ways that contradicted the fashion of black sociologists and political scientists of the 1970s and later. It made him something of an outlier in his era; and made me an outlier in mine. An insistence upon valuing the internal lives of people was not part of the econometric and statistical approach to American history that was overtaking the field when I was in graduate school.

Perhaps that was the beginning of my sense that the Ellisons' apartment was a refuge. Not only as a connection with the village and tribe, but as a hope that there could be a future for scholars who valued the intangible as much as, and sometimes more than, the tangible.

Ellison's complex world view, nurtured in Oklahoma, insisted that the tangible aspects of life in Harlem—the “ruggedness of life there, . . . the hardship, the poverty, the sordidness, the filth”—must not be allowed to override the “something else” that is “subjective, willful, and complexly and compellingly human.” Ellison believed this ineffable quality “makes for our strength” and “our endurance and our promise.”²

The “something else” that Ellison entreats other artists and intellectuals to value is, I believe, coterminous with the cultural heritage that Ellison credits to his Oklahoma roots. In his own words:

We were forced into segregation, but within that situation we were able to live close to the larger society and to abstract from that society enough combination of values—including religion and hope and art—which allowed us to endure and impose our own idea of what the world should be and of what man should be, and of what American society should be. I'm not speaking of power here, but of vision, of values and dreams. Yes, and of will.³

There was no denial of racism in the Ellison household. Indeed, the center of gravity for me in the apartment was a photograph—nay, one of THE (original) photographs—of fire hoses and police dogs in Birmingham, Alabama, turned on civil rights demonstrators, including children. I stood in front of it for several minutes. Mouth agape. Unable to speak.

This was the backstory of my childhood, that first generation to desegregate schools and neighborhoods. When would our church be bombed, as had hap-

pened to our friends in Birmingham? For years, I could not enter the undercroft of our sanctuary without dread. If four girls in our same children's club could die, doing what we were doing in Oklahoma City, why not us?

The energy of the photograph was held in suspension between the sturdy comfort of Oklahoma days—as Ellison's boyhood friends leaned into their stories and laughter—and the indomitable sweep of nature in the Hudson River that stretched past the dining room windows. I am certain there were other features to the apartment, but this was the energy. The balance between evil and life.

I wanted to know their secret. How did these Oklahoma men—and Fanny—manage to live life so fully, robustly, joyfully in the shadow of such racism? How did they open the envelope to read the words “keep this colored boy [or, in my case, girl] running” and not turn into Ras the Destroyer?

I had to return to Oklahoma as an adult to understand more than skin-deep. I had to read *Juneteenth* to understand to the marrow of my bones. What made it possible was what I heard and felt and smiled along with and felt warmed by: the heritage of the Black West. A robust and unexpected blend of Southern folkways; black Indians and black cowboys; mulatto descendants of *de facto* unions that defied *de jure* constraints; a vibrant professional class unrestrained by colorism or caste; an informal clan of physicians, journalists, dentists, lawyers, pharmacists bonded by mutual support against intolerance and for each other's success.

Men of such integrity and superiority that racism could not stop them; rather, their response to that racism became a running joke within the community. The American Negro “janitor” in the state capitol library to whom lawyers and judges routinely turned for advice, because he knew more law than the justices on the state supreme court. The American Negro surgeon who still held out against the gentrification of Deep Deuce into Bricktown; who, when he was forbidden to fly to Ft. Sill to fulfill his duties as doctor to the Buffalo Soldiers contingent, purchased a plane, obtained a pilot's license, and installed an air strip convenient to his home.

In terms of the black West, these men “rode easy in the saddle”: relaxed, balanced, flowing, strong. These were my village elders; but, sadly, it may be true that this is a vanished tribe.

That is, unless we choose to make it otherwise.

Notes

1. Ralph Ellison, *Juneteenth* (New York: Vintage, 2000).
2. Ralph Ellison, “A Very Stern Discipline,” *Going to the Territory* (New York: Random House, 1986), 275-307. 276
3. *Ibid.*, 299.